

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Office of the Ombudsman**

**Tonya Vidal Kinlow**  
**Ombudsman**



To: Mayor Adrian Fenty  
Council Chairman Vincent Gray

CC: Councilmember Carol Schwartz  
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State Superintendent Deborah Gist  
State Board of Education Members  
Public Charter School Board Members

From: Tonya Vidal Kinlow  
Ombudsman for Public Education

Date: July 7, 2008

Re: Office of the Ombudsman May 2008 Case Report

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The Office of the Ombudsman submits the attached report and analysis of its May 2008 cases for your information. Please feel free to contact Tonya Vidal Kinlow at (202) 442-6363 if you have questions or need additional information.

# Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

## May 2008 Case Report

### Summary

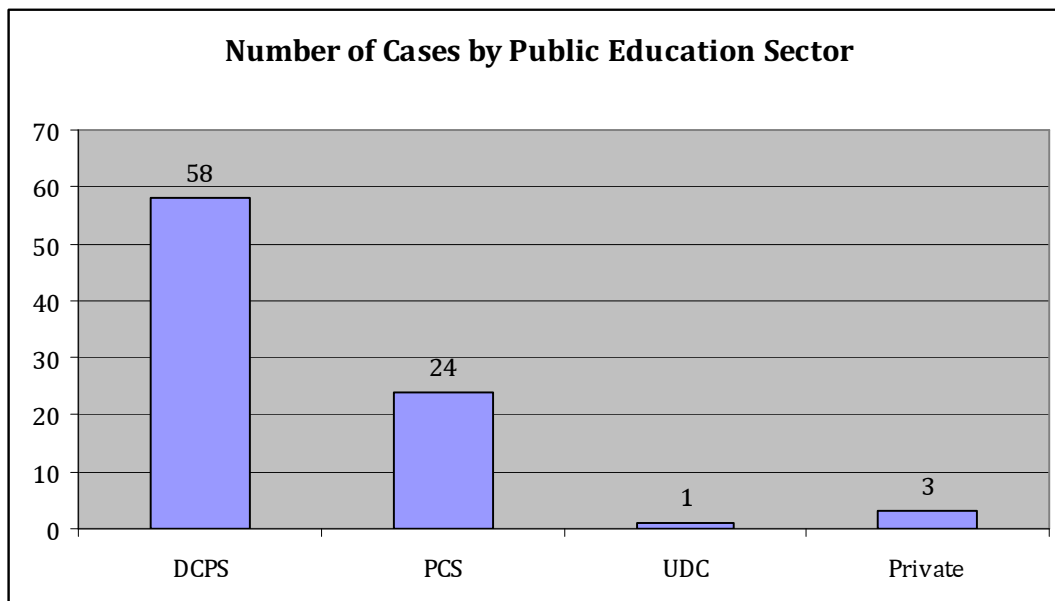
Each month the Office of the Ombudsman provides a report summarizing its activity. The information in this report highlights the trends and issues most important in the month of May 2008. Traditional constituent services departments encounter similar cases; however, the Ombudsman for Public Education strives to connect these issues at an individual, group and institutional level to identify systemic problems.

When working to resolve these issues, the Ombudsman for Public Education acts independently, informally and neutrally. It is the role of the office to approach its duties as a neutral fact finder rather than as an advocate. When investigation reveals that an improper action or inaction has occurred, the Ombudsman works to facilitate an alternative course of action that will prevent or mitigate the consequences and resolve the issue. This report highlights the trends for May 2008.

### Issue Trends

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education handled 86 cases regarding 97 issues in May 2008. This month's education sector categories include "Private," along with previously used categories – District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Public Charter Schools (PCS) and University of the District of Columbia (UDC). Those marked private were issues relating to District residents in private schools paid for with city funds. The majority of cases - approximately 67 percent - stemmed from concerns with DCPS. However, each month the office receives more cases from public charter school clients. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of data.

**Figure 1**



The analysis of cases also includes an evaluation of the types of issues and type of individual contact, i.e., student or personnel. The Office of the Ombudsman has seen an increase in the volume of calls from school staff, though student-related issues still comprised the overwhelming majority of all cases at 93 percent.

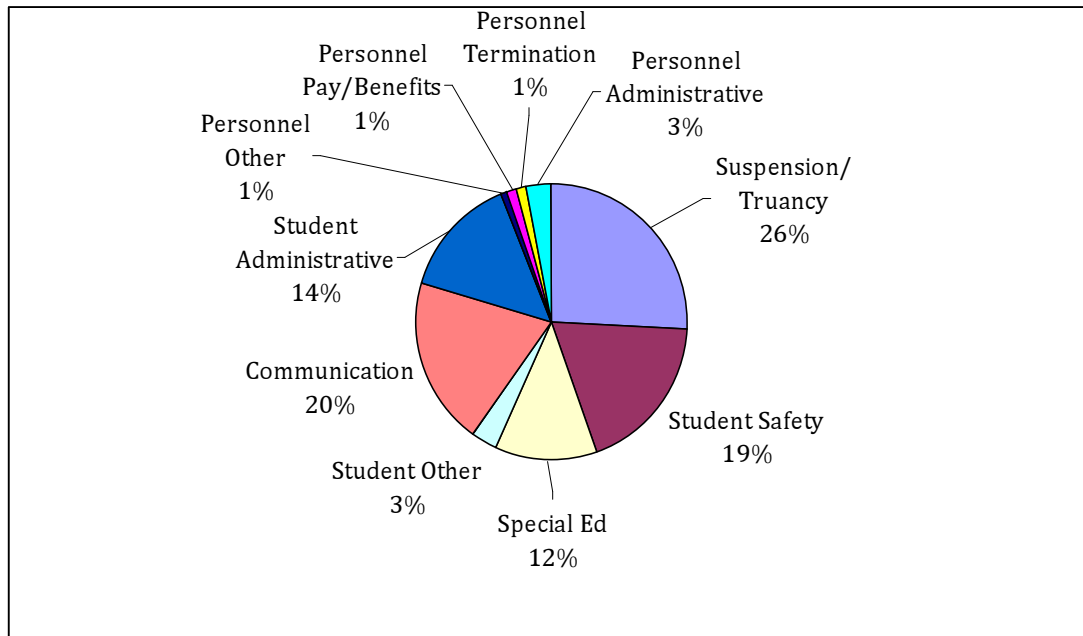
**Figure 2: Frequency of Issues in Cases**

	Issue Code	Frequency	Percent of Cases
Student (93%)	Suspension/Truancy	25	26%
	Safety	18	19%
	Special Ed	12	12%
	Other	3	3%
	Medical	0	0%
	Communication	19	20%
	Administrative	14	14%
Personnel (7%)	Safety	0	0%
	Other	1	1%
	Pay/Benefits	1	1%
	Termination	1	1%
	Administrative	3	3%

Figures 2 and 3 highlight the three most prevalent issues brought by students: suspension/truancy, communication, and safety. Many of communication issues overlap with the suspension and truancy cases as parents and guardians called about the lack of communication and information around these issues. In each case, the Office of the Ombudsman worked with the client and school administrator to resolve the issue and facilitated improved communication. Student special education issues continue to be a consistent portion of the cases received. The Ombudsman serves these clients by directing them to special education specialists and explaining the process for getting Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students.

Student administrative issues this month, comprising 14 percent of all cases, were in regards to addressing policy and procedures within the school. Parents and students reported that they were either not informed of or unaware of policies regarding transcripts, graduation requirements and disciplinary policies. These cases often overlapped with communication problems. The Office of the Ombudsman resolved these issues by acting as a third-party mediator to determine the facts of each situation and outlining the steps going forward for the parent and the student.

**Figure 3: May 2008 Cases by Issue**



Though this chart highlights major concerns in public education, it is important to view the issues within each sector.

### **District of Columbia Public Schools**

Within cases from DCPS, over 44 percent concerned safety and communication. Communication cases relate to procedural matters such as grades, suspensions, and school programming. These cases were the quickest to close because most cases required connecting the client with the information. Guardians called frequently asking about the status of their student's suspension, academic record, and standing.

Safety-related cases largely dealt with students that were in conflicts with other students either within the school or from a neighboring school. Parents called with concerns over management of the conflict and mediation. In some cases the parents had decided to move the child from the school to prevent further safety concerns. Three safety cases this month included incidents involving school staff and a student. The Office of the Ombudsman works with the school and the family immediately to resolve these issues, including coordinating an investigation of the incident with school security and MPD.

### **Public Charter Schools**

Of the public charter school cases, almost half related to suspension and truancy. Cases related to suspension and expulsion in public charter schools have been a consistent trend since the Office of the Ombudsman opened in December 2007.

In one May case, a charter school expelled a group of students due to an incident at the school. Because the incident occurred so close to the end of the school year, the parents

asked the school to allow the students to complete the year. Because the families did not formally request a hearing to appeal the expulsion decision, the Charter school refused to allow the students to return. The charter school also did not give the parents information on how the student could complete the school year. One of the families had contacted their DCPS neighborhood school about enrollment. The staff at the neighborhood school did not effectively communicate the process for enrollment leaving the guardian to believe her child would have to wait until the following year.

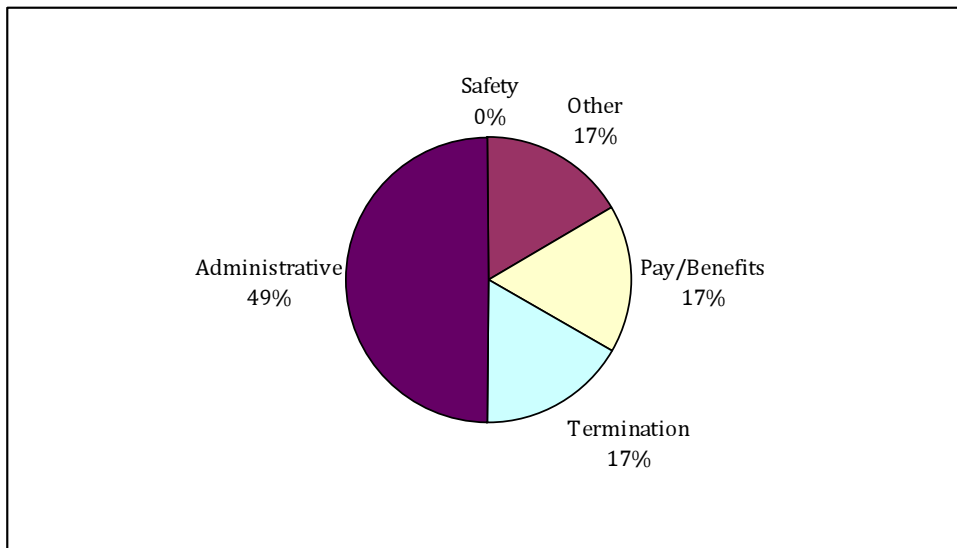
The Office of the Ombudsman followed up with the charter school and the neighborhood school to facilitate an effective transfer for one of the families. The Ombudsman helped the other family comply with the home school process to complete the current grade.

While this is an example of a specific case, it is typical of many of the charter school suspension/expulsion cases that the Ombudsman's office has helped to resolve. The current policy is very clear. A child may enroll in their designated in-boundary DCPS school at any time during the school year, however, this information often does not reach parents faced with charter to DCPS transfers mid-year. The breakdown in communication occurs in the charter school and in the DCPS school. This case highlights the relationship between the charter school suspension policy and truancy. The lack of communication around transfer procedures between public education sectors is another link that unclear to parents.

## Personnel Issues

Figure 4 shows a breakdown of the personnel issues addressed by the Office of the Ombudsman.

**Figure 4: May 2008 Personnel Issues**



Almost half of the cases related to administrative issues. These cases are largely the connection of school staff to central office procedures and policies. The Office of the

Ombudsman works with personnel and central office parties to resolve the issues in a timely manner.

## **Conclusion**

The cases received by the Ombudsman this month were heavily student focused especially in regarding communication, safety and suspension/truancy. These are trends consistent with previous months particularly with public charter schools. DCPS cases still point toward more focus on issues of student safety and discipline procedures.